



# Communication with older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

## Rapport

In many traditional cultures, a high sense of value is placed on building and maintaining relationships. Taking a 'person before business' approach will help form this relationship and build rapport.

- Introduce yourself in a warm and friendly way.
- Ask where people are from, share stories about yourself or find other topics of common interest.

## Language

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not speak English as their first language. Some general tips to overcome language barriers may include:

- Avoid using complex words and jargon.
- Explain why you need to ask any questions.
- Always check you understood the meaning of words the person has used and vice versa.
- Use diagrams and images to explain concepts and terms.
- Be cautious about using traditional languages or Creole words unless you have excellent understanding.
- If required, seek help from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

## Body language

Some non-verbal communication cues (hand gestures, facial expressions etc.) used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have different meanings in the Western context. Be mindful that your own non-verbal communication will be observed and interpreted. For example, feelings of annoyance may be reflected by your body language and are likely to be noticed.

## Time

In Western culture, emphasis is placed on time to meet deadlines and schedules. Time is perceived differently in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, as more value is placed on family responsibilities and community relationships.

- Consider allocating flexible appointment times.
- Take the time to explain and do not rush the person.

## Personal space

Be conscious about the distance to which you are standing near a person. Standing too close to a person that you are unfamiliar with, or of the opposite gender, can make a person feel uncomfortable or threatened.

- Always seek permission and explain to the person reasons why you need to touch them.
- Establish rapport first to make the person feel comfortable.

## Silence

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, extended periods of silence during conversations are considered the 'norm' and are valued. Silent pauses are used to listen, show respect or consensus.

- Observe both the silence and body language to gauge when it is appropriate to start speaking.
- Be respectful and provide the person with adequate time.
- Seek clarification that what was asked or discussed was understood.

## Eye contact

In Western society averting gaze can be viewed as being dishonest, rude or showing a lack of interest but for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, avoidance of eye contact is customarily a gesture of respect. Some (but not all) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may therefore be uncomfortable with direct eye contact, especially if unfamiliar.

- Observe the other person's body language.
- Follow the other person's lead and modify eye contact accordingly.
- Avoid cross-gender eye contact unless the person initiates it and is comfortable.

## Titles

The terms 'Aunty' or 'Uncle' are used to show respect for someone older than you. This person does not have to be a blood relative or necessarily an Elder.

- Only address people with these titles if approval is given and/or a positive relationship exists.

## Shame

'Shame' (deeply felt feelings of being ashamed or embarrassed) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may result from sharing private or personal information, cultural beliefs and from breaches of confidentiality.

- Take a discrete approach and avoid discussions in open or public spaces.
- Build trust and rapport to help people feel safe and comfortable with you and in their surroundings.
- Ensure confidentiality and consider Men's and Women's Business.

## Listening

Explaining may take time because of narrative communication style or due to linguistic differences. The person may be struggling to communicate what they are trying to get across.

- Avoid selective hearing and ensure you are 'actively' listening.
- Paraphrase by summarising and repeating what the person said. This will help with clarification and signal you have been listening.
- Show empathy, be attentive and avoid continually interrupting or speaking over the person.

## Questioning

Indirect questioning is the approach most preferred. Direct questioning may lead to misunderstandings and discourage participation.

- Use indirect, 'round about' approaches (e.g. frame a question as a statement then allow time for the answer to be given).
- Clarify if the person understood the meanings of your words or questions
- Avoid compound questions (e.g. "how often do you visit your GP and what are the reasons that you don't?").
- Use plain words (e.g. say 'start' rather than 'commence').

- Do not ask the person to continually repeat themselves.
- Avoid using hypothetical examples.

## The word: 'Yes'

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a tendency to agree with a question even when they do not understand or agree, and may answer questions the way they think others want. People may say “yes” to questions to end the conversation so they can leave, to deal with other priorities, or because they simply feel uncomfortable.

- Take the time to build rapport to make the person feel comfortable.
- If a person repeatedly says ‘yes’ immediately after a question, ask with respect what they understood from the questions and/or to explain reasons for their decision.

## Gender

Gender plays an important part in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural matters.

- Avoid standing too close to a person of the opposite gender.
- Avoid cross-gender eye contact unless the person initiates it and is comfortable.

*Adapted from NSW Elder Abuse Helpline & Resource Unit Toolkit, Tool 3.6 Communicating Effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People at <http://www.elderabusehelpline.com.au/for-professionals/EHRU-toolkit>*